

## Attitudes towards women's role: a comparative analysis based on the 1977 NORC General Social Survey (GSS) and the 1982 German General Social Survey (ALLBUS)

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Attitudes towards Women's Role -- A Comparative Analysis Based on the 1977 NORC General Social Survey (GSS) and the 1982 German General Social Survey (ALLBUS)

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## 1. Prologue

### 1.1 Introduction

The discussion of the situation of women in Western industrialized society in current international and German publications is influenced mostly by the dimension of sexual differentiation of social roles.

The traditional role of women, which assigns certain functions and forms of behavior to women in contemporary society, is described and then analyzed in these studies as a central determinant of a historical- and sex-based process of discrimination.

The analysis is often held quite theoretically, subject of empirical studies mostly is a chosen group of women of the society in question. There are few representative studies that analyze attitudes of the respective society towards the concept of sex-roles.

It is the purpose of this paper to compare attitudes of Germans and Americans towards sex-roles by using comparable data from the 1977 NORC General Social Survey and the 1982 German General Social Survey (ALLBUS). Although there has been a considerable increase of married women and mothers in the labor force of the US and the FRG, the particular focus of this paper are the questions:

- (1) In general, are US and German attitudes towards the role of women similar or different, and
- (2) are there different patterns of attitudes among socio-demographic subgroups in one or both of these societies?

The paper is organized as follows: After a theoretical analysis of the traditional women's role and a short description of the extent of women's participation in the current labor force of the US and the FRG, we present descriptive results of the women's role items of the 1977 GSS and the 1982 ALLBUS. A comparison between the response-patterns of both samples and several corresponding subgroups will be done through analysis of medians.



## 1.2 The Concept of Traditional Women's Role

The concept of traditional women's role includes the socially determined responsibility and attachment of women to house and family. This social division of labor came into being at the end of the 18th century with the beginning of industrialization and the change from family-centered to factory-centered production (Nye, 1963: 4; König, 1974: 261). Within this structure, women and men became more aware of stronger sex-typed role patterns, and "a sharp division of labor within the family, based on sex, emerged" (Ridley, 1972: 37). In other words, restrictive expectations developed concerning the content of sex-roles, including even the assigned functions and forms of behavior. In its ideal type this sharp segregation of inner-dimension (house and family) of women and outside-dimension (occupation) of men does not include at all the participation of women in the labor force. Their social status is defined only through their husband (Ridley, 1972: 373; König, 1974: 257).

## 1.3 The Participation of Women in the Labor Force of the US and the FRG

Table 1: Proportion of Women in Total Labor Force and Compositions of the Female Labor Force of the US in 1978 and the FRG in 1978-1981

	US 1978 %	FRG 1978 %	FRG 1979 %	FRG 1980 %	FRG 1981 %
Proportion of women in labor force	42	38	38	38	38
Proportion of wives in female labor force	66	60	60	60	60
Proportion of mothers with children under 18 years of age in female labor force	40*	37-	36-	35+	35+

\*: 16-64 years of age      -: 15-64 years of age      +: 15 years and older

Source: Rainwater and Rain (1981)  
Statistisches Bundesamt (1979, 1980, 1981, 1982)

Rainwater and Rain (1981: 8-1ff.) state that in the US in 1978 women made up 42% of the total labor force, which, in turn, represents 50% of the total female population between 16-64 years of age. Two thirds of the female labor force consist of working wives and about 40% of the female labor force are mothers (wives and single mothers).

Results of the Statistische Bundesamt (Census Bureau) for the FRG in 1978 (Statistisches Bundesamt, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982) show a participation rate of women in total labor force of 38% -- which did not vary between 1978 and 1981 -- which represents 47% of all women between 15 and 64 years of age. The composition of the female labor force consists of 60% working wives and around 37% working mothers (wives and single mothers) in 1978, proportions that do not vary much onto 1981.

In 1950 the proportion of women in total labor force was about 30% in the US and about 34% in the FRG, during which time the rate of working wives in female labor force is 25% versus 35%. Even the share of mothers in the female labor force of both countries is considerably lower in 1950 (Rainwater and Rain, 1981: 8-2; Bundestag, 1981: 17).

Altogether these results show a considerable increase in the labor force participation of wives and mothers in the US and the FRG since 1950, whereas the structure of the female labor force in the US in 1978 and the FRG between 1978 and 1981 is about the same. The main difference in the development of the female labor force in both countries seems to be the US having a steady increase (totalling 12%) in the participation rate of women between 1950 and 1978, whereas in the FRG the participation rate of women in total labor force didn't vary much.

Descriptions of the employment conditions for women seem to be nearly the same for the US and the FRG. Various sources indicate that women are getting a lower education, are employed in lower paid jobs, and are confronted with restricted possibilities in advancement (Lewis, 1978: 40; Bundestag, 1981: 16). High participation rates of women mostly are found in jobs labeled typically female, such as nurses, teachers, secretaries, etc. (Oppenheimer, 1973: 197; Bundestag, 1981: 19).

## 2. Problem Formulation

The development of the female labor force's structure in the US and the FRG shows a considerable increase in working wives and mothers until 1950 for both countries. This increase may have an impact on the attitude towards the role of women. But, in the US as well as in the FRG, the normative attitudes of society only support the employment of single women (Oppenheimer, 1979: 197; Beck-Gernsheim, 1980: 125 ff.; Lewis, 1978: 137 ff.). However, it is suggested that an increasing number of younger and higher educated people will change in time the attitudes towards women's role.

Based on this background, it is the purpose of this paper to examine attitudes of the US-American and German population towards women's role in four aspects:

- The traditional division of labor between men and women,
- the renouncement of a woman's career in favor of her husband's career,
- the likely suffering of a preschool child if his or her mother works, and,
- the possible negative consequences in the relationship of a working mother with her children (without specification of their age).

The particular interest here centers on the question: Does a similar representative response pattern, considering the above mentioned aspects, exist in both societies, or can there indeed be found different response patterns for socio-demographic subgroups according to age and education of the respondents in each population? In addition, we will list marital status and sex for different response patterns within the categories of the socio-demographic characteristics. Referring to the concept of the traditional women's role we expect to find that especially people who have not or not yet made the decision to have a family, for whatever reason, are, too, changing attitudes towards women's role. In contrast, the comparison only between both sexes is likely to show rather similar response patterns in favoring more the traditional view of these aspects because the socialisation patterns of males and females supply the same values in regard to women's role.

### 3. Sampling Description and Specification of the Variables

#### 3.1 Sampling Descriptions

The following descriptive analysis of attitudes towards women's role is based on results of the 1977 General Social Survey and the 1982 German General Social Survey (ALLBUS).

Both surveys are representative, the 1977 GSS for the total non-institutionalized English-speaking population of the continental United States 18 years of age or older, the 1982 ALLBUS for the non-institutionalized citizens of the FRG 18 years of age and older, residing in the FRG including West-Berlin.

The completed cases are 1530 for the 1977 GSS and 2994 for the 1982 ALLBUS.

#### 3.2 Specification of the Variables

##### 3.2.1 Attitudes

In 1977, the GSS's first used items measuring attitudes towards women's role essentially refer to the main objective of traditional women's role, the responsibility and attachment of a woman to house and family. The precise wording is as follows:

Item a: It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.

Item b: It is more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have one herself.

Item c: A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.

Item d: A working mother can establish as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work.

The items are scaled ordinal, which enables the respondent to express his or her opinion on a range from 1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree.

### 3.2.2 Socio-Demographic Characteristics

According to point 2., the socio-demographic characteristics used to define subgroups of both samples are: the respondent's age (RA), education (HD = Highest Degree), marital status (MS), and Sex (SX).

Except for the respondent's education, the categories of these characteristics are equivalent in both samples. While the different school systems in the US and the FRG do not allow an exact comparison of educational attainments, for the US sample we used the variable 'highest degree' and for the FRG sample a combination of the variables 'Schulabschluß' and 'Ausbildungsabschluß'. This at least enables us to compare tentatively those respondents with the highest educational attainment in both countries.

The specification of the categories was done as follows:

RA: 1=18-19 years of age

2=20-29 "

3=30-39 "

4=40-49 "

5=50-59 "

6=60 years of age and over

HD: 1977 GSS

0=less than high school

1=high school

2=more than high school

1982 ALLBUS

0=less than Fachhochschul-/Hochschulreife

1=Fachhochschul-/Hochschulreife

2=Fachhochschul-/Hochschulabschluß

MS: 1=married

2=widowed

3=divorced/separated

4=never married

SX: 1=male

2=female

## 4. Descriptive Results

### 4.1 The Percentage Distribution of the Women's Role Items

Table 2: Percentage Distribution of the Women's Role Items of the 1977 GSS and the 1982 ALLBUS

Item		1 in %	2 in %	3 in %	4 in %	Total in %	Total N
a: It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and the family.	USA	18.3	47.5	28.1	6.1	100.0	1503
	FRG	41.0	29.3	19.5	10.3	100.0	2913
b: It is more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have one herself.	USA	13.9	43.2	36.3	6.6	100.0	1476
	FRG	22.1	29.9	28.9	19.1	100.0	2851
c: A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.	USA	20.8	46.5	28.2	4.5	100.0	1498
	FRG	61.7	25.9	8.6	3.7	100.0	2934
d: A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a woman who does not work.	USA	15.7	33.3	33.5	17.5	100.0	1505
	FRG	40.9	25.8	24.1	9.2	100.0	2922

1 = strongly agree

3 = disagree

2 = agree

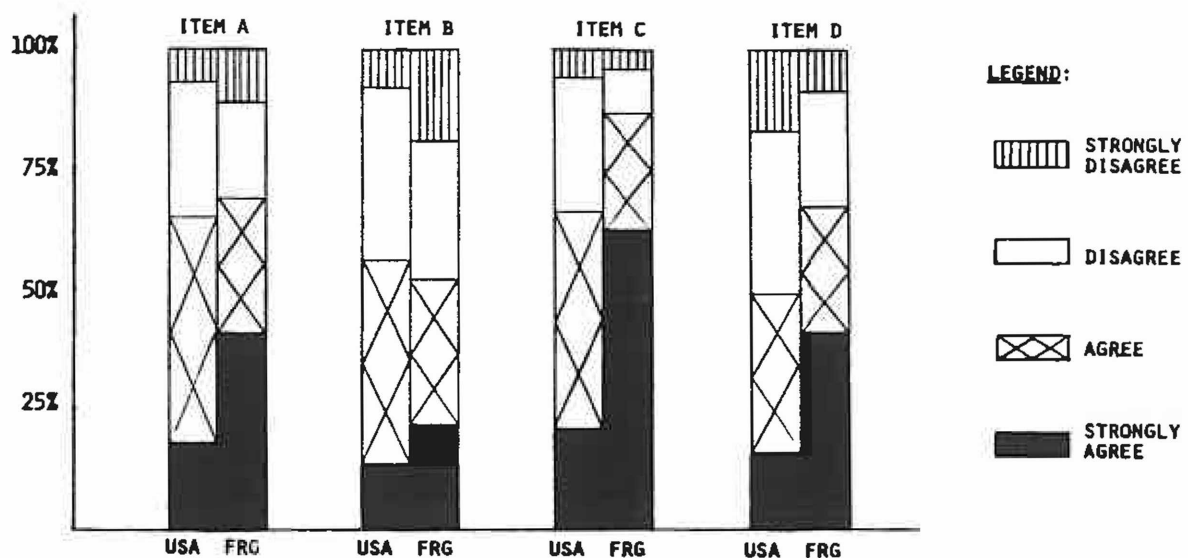
4 = strongly disagree

Comparing the US sample to the FRG sample, there is in both samples nearly similar overall agreement (strongly agree and agree) of 66%/70% with the traditional view of the division of labor between man and woman (item a); a difference of 57% (US) to 52% (FRG) in the importance of a wife helping her husband's career rather than having one herself (item b); a difference of 67% (US) to 88% (FRG) in the belief of a likely (according to the German wording 'sicherlich') suffering of a preschool child if his or her mother works (item c); and a 49% to 67% difference concerning the ability of a working mother to establish as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a non-working mother (item d).

These results suggest that the US respondents show a consistent pattern favoring traditional aspects of women's role. The German respondents show about the same tendency to favor the traditional division of labor; attach

somewhat less importance to a wife helping her husband's career; and show a much stronger tendency to agree with the suffering of a preschool child if his or her mother works. Yet, by contrast, they agree in two thirds of the cases in favor of the ability of a working mother to establish as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a non-working mother. Looking in addition at Figure 1 it becomes evident that those German respondents who agree with the traditional aspects of women's role mentioned in item a, b, and c tend to express their agreement stronger than the Americans do, in favoring the category 'strongly agree'.

Figure 1: Cumulated Percentage Distribution of the Women's Role Items of the 1977 GSS and the 1982 ALLBUS

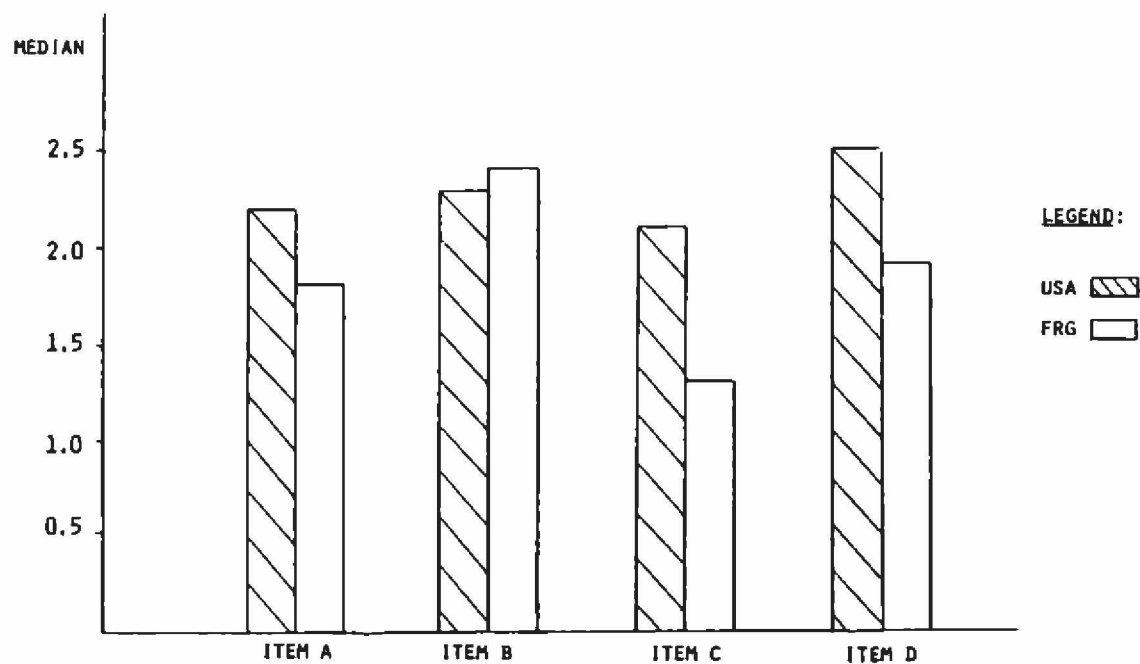


According to these results, both the 1977 American respondents and the 1982 German respondents show nearly the same traditional attitude towards the division of labor between the sexes and the importance of a wife helping her husband's career rather than having one herself. However, the attitude towards a working mother may be interpreted as less restrictive in the FRG sample only by taking into consideration that the responses here are obviously high depending on the age of the child in question.

#### 4.2 The Comparison of Medians

The comparison of the response patterns of both samples to those of the defined subgroups was done by an analysis of the medians. In Figure 2 it is shown at first -- in addition to the single results in section 4.1 -- the central tendency of the sample responses of both surveys.

Figure 2: Medians of the 1977 GSS and the 1982 ALLBUS Women's Role Items

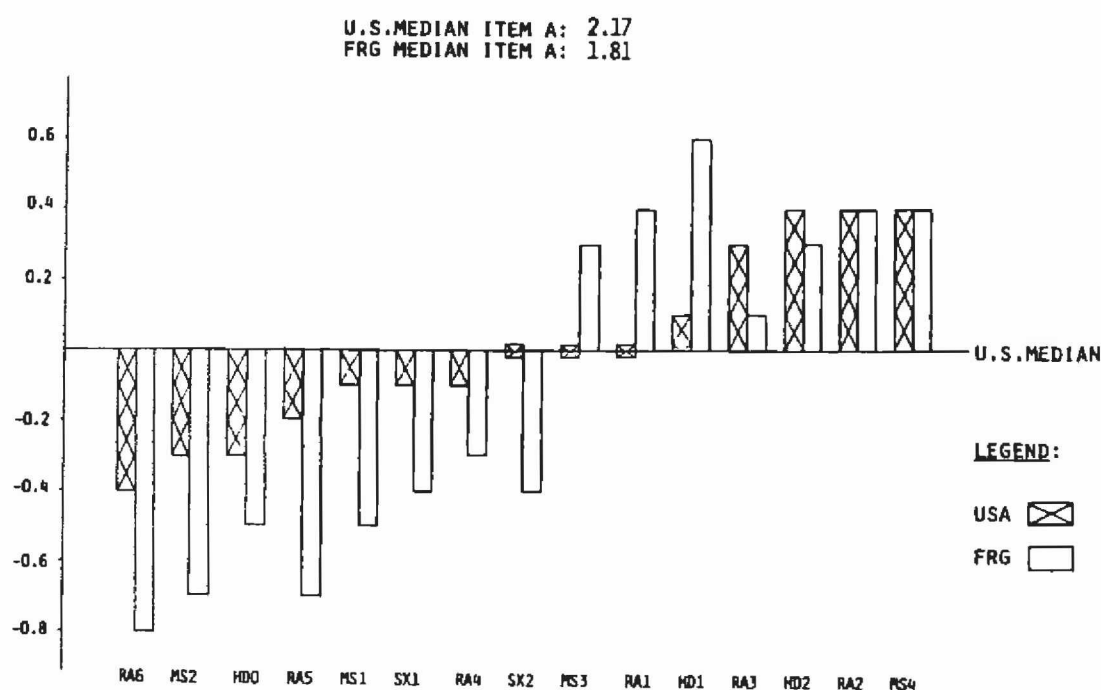


Next (Figures 3-6), we will show the deviations of the single subgroup medians of both samples<sup>1</sup> from the US sample median for each item. This manner of representation was chosen to get a less complex picture, which also allows the comparison of the results of the FRG subgroups to the FRG sample, too.

<sup>1</sup> The single medians are listed in Table 1 in the appendix.



Figure 3: Deviation of the Single Subgroup-Medians from the Item A -- US Median

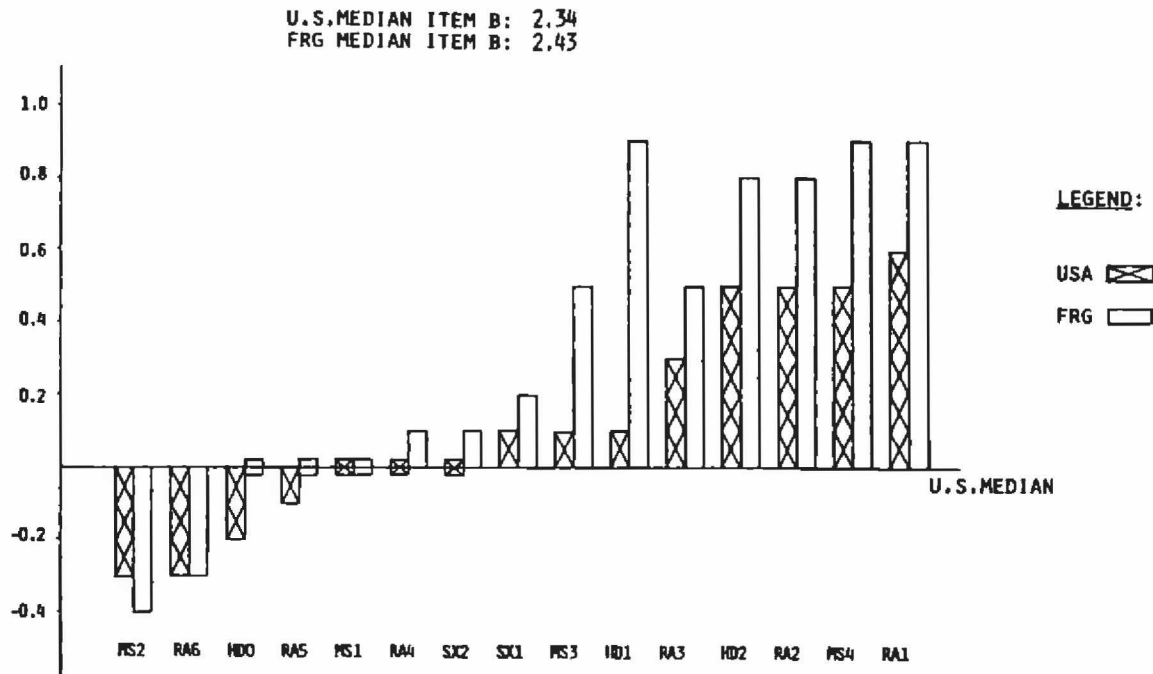


The first impression of Figure 3 shows for item a remarkable deviations for a large number of American and German subgroups from their respective sample medians. The same central tendency as for the US sample is shown only by the following subgroups: female, divorced/separated, and 18-19 years of age. Contrary to the US, both sexes show the same central tendency in the FRG sample.

A median > 2.50, indicating a disagreement by more than 50% with item a, the traditional view of the division of labor, is found in the US sample for the following subgroups: 20-29 years of age, educational attainment 'more than high school', and the never married. In the FRG sample these subgroups are: 18-19 years of age, 20-29 years of age, 'Fachhochschul-/Hochschulreife', 'Fachhochschul-/Hochschulabschluß', and the never married.

In Figure 4 for item b it is shown, too, that only some of the subgroups show the same main central tendency as their respective samples. In the US, these are: respondents 40-49 years of age, the married, and the females. The sample median for the FRG is matched only by respondents 40-49 years of age and female respondents.

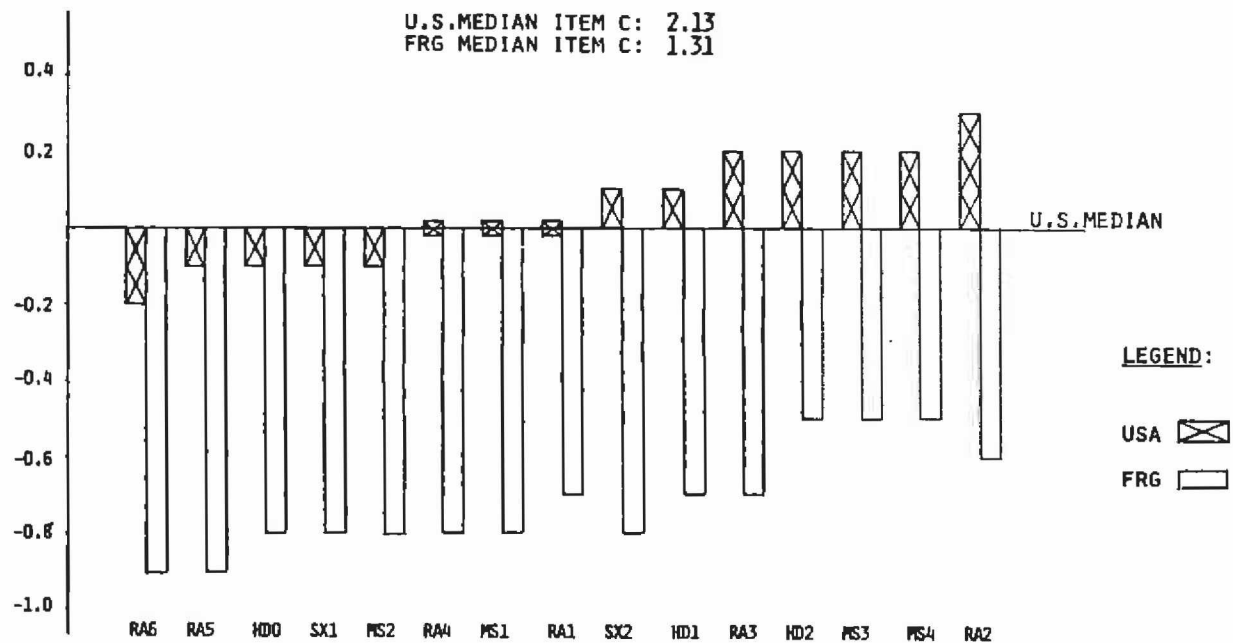
Figure 4: Deviation of the Single Subgroup-Medians from the Item B --  
US Median



A median > 2.50, which indicates a disagreement of more than 50% with the importance of a wife helping her husband's career rather than having one herself, is found in the US subgroups: 18-19 years of age, 20-29 years of age, 30-39 years of age, educational attainment 'more than high school', and the never married. In the FRG, the comparable subgroups are: the ages of 18-39 years, 'Fachhochschul-/Hochschulreife', 'Fachhochschul-/Hochschulabschluß', of marital status 'divorced/separated' and 'never married', and the males.

For item c, Figure 5 shows that the following subgroups do not differ from the overall sample medians: in the US, 18-19 years of age, 40-49 years of age, and marital status 'married', in the FRG, 40-49 years of age, less than 'Fachhochschul-/Hochschulreife', marital status 'married' and 'widowed', the males and the females.

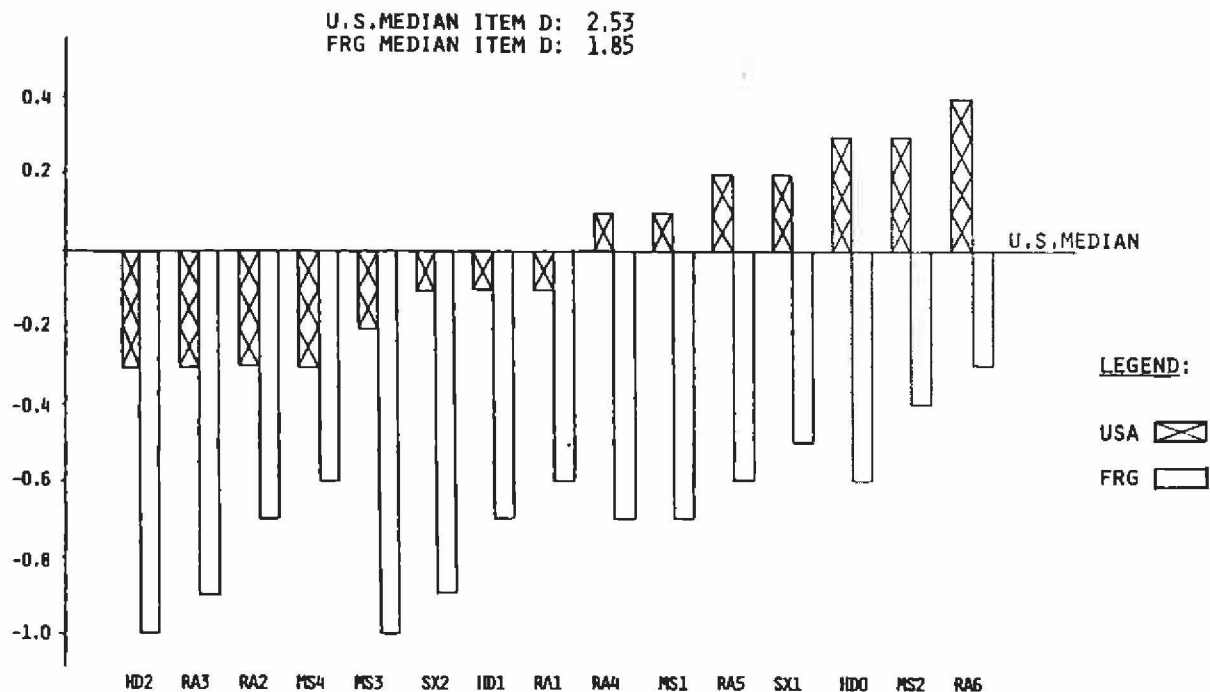
Figure 5: Deviation of the Single Subgroup-Medians from the Item C --  
US Median



None of the defined subgroups in either sample show a predominant disagreement with the likely suffering of a preschool child if his or her mother works, whereas nearly all of the defined FRG subgroups tend towards a strong agreement with the suffering of a preschool child, stated in section 4.1 for the FRG sample.

In Figure 6 it is shown that the sample median is not representative for a single defined subgroup, whereas in the FRG the sample median is the same as the medians for the subgroups 18-19 years of age, 50-59 years of age, less than 'Fachhochschul-/Hochschulreife', and marital status 'divorced/separated'.

Figure 6: Deviation of the Single Subgroup-Medians from the Item D -- US Median



A median < 2.50 which represents an agreement of more than 50% with item d, namely the ability of a working mother to establish as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a non-working mother, is found in the US for the subgroups between the ages of 18-39 years, of educational attainment 'high school' and 'more than high school', of marital status 'divorced/separated' and 'never married', and the females. In comparison all defined FRG subgroups show the same tendency as the FRG sample of item d.

To summarize, the analysis of the single subgroup medians for both samples shows that for the US and the FRG as well of each of the four items the median sample is representative for only a few of the defined subgroups.

A predominant disagreement with item a, b, and c, together with a predominant agreement with item d, which would represent a consistent non-traditional view of the mentioned aspects, were not found in a single defined subgroup of both samples. Regarding only item a, b, and d, a disagreement of more than 50% with item a and b and an agreement of more than 50% with

item d is found in the US for respondents between 20 and 29 years of age, of educational attainment 'more than high school', and of marital status 'never married'. In the FRG these respondents are the corresponding subgroups of 20-29 years of age, of 'Fachhochschul-/Hochschulabschluß', and of marital status 'never married'. In addition, respondents aged 18-19 years also show the same tendency.

## 5. Conclusion

From the data presented above, we conclude that a similar response pattern of the US and the FRG does not exist. The US sample shows a consistent pattern in favoring the more traditional aspects of women's role. The FRG sample is almost equal in favoring the traditional view of the division of labor between man and woman as to the importance of a wife helping her husband's career rather than having one herself. However, the attitude towards a working mother can be interpreted as less restrictive in the FRG, however, only if taking into consideration that the German responses are evidently high depending on the age of the child in question. Even the overall response pattern for each sample is not representative for all the defined respective subgroups. Indeed, in both samples those groups expected of changing attitudes towards a non-traditional view -- the younger respondents, the higher educated respondents, and the never married respondents -- do show this, however only in regard to the traditional view of the division of labor, the importance of a wife helping her husband's career rather than to have one herself, and to the ability of a working mother to establish as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a non-working mother. The likely suffering of a preschool child in the US and the FRG still represents a fact even for those respondents who support a non-traditional attitude towards the other aspects in question. Women were not more likely than men to support a non-traditional view of the role of women.

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## Appendix

Table 3: Medians of the 1977 GSS and 1982 ALLBUS Woman's Role Items for Defined Subgroups and Total N

M E D I A N		I T E M A		I T E M B		I T E M C		I T E M D	
		USA	FRG	USA	FRG	USA	FRG	USA	FRG
RESPONDENT'S AGE	RA 1	2.19 N= 28	2.58 N= 59	2.93 N= 29	3.18 N= 61	2.13 N= 27	1.39 N= 62	2.39 N= 26	1.92 N= 61
	RA 2	2.63 N= 335	2.56 N= 494	2.76 N= 331	3.09 N= 491	2.39 N= 335	1.50 N= 494	2.23 N= 334	1.81 N= 498
	RA 3	2.45 N= 298	2.30 N= 521	2.61 N= 290	2.76 N= 516	2.34 N= 299	1.44 N= 527	2.20 N= 297	1.61 N= 523
	RA 4	2.12 N= 246	1.85 N= 573	2.25 N= 239	2.42 N= 565	2.08 N= 248	1.30 N= 577	2.63 N= 251	1.78 N= 579
	RA 5	2.00 N= 265	1.54 N= 454	2.17 N= 258	2.29 N= 439	2.02 N= 261	1.24 N= 461	2.68 N= 266	1.88 N= 453
	RA 6	1.82 N= 324	1.32 N= 812	1.99 N= 318	1.91 N= 779	1.89 N= 322	1.21 N= 813	2.94 N= 324	2.08 N= 808
HIGHEST DEGREE	HD 0	1.95 N= 525	1.68 N=2460	2.12 N= 513	2.31 N=2402	1.99 N= 520	1.29 N=2481	2.81 N= 527	1.89 N=2470
	HD 1	2.25 N= 731	2.81 N= 199	2.37 N= 714	3.19 N= 196	2.18 N= 731	1.44 N= 199	2.43 N= 730	1.82 N= 200
	HD 2	2.57 N= 242	2.53 N= 248	2.77 N= 240	3.09 N= 247	2.31 N= 242	1.45 N= 248	2.20 N= 242	1.48 N= 246
MARITAL STATUS	MS 1	2.14 N= 956	1.68 N=1771	2.30 N= 933	2.34 N=1740	2.09 N= 956	1.27 N=1790	2.62 N= 962	1.84 N=1779
	MS 2	1.91 N= 162	1.38 N= 442	2.02 N= 159	1.88 N= 417	1.97 N= 159	1.26 N= 440	2.75 N= 162	2.08 N= 435
	MS 3	2.19 N= 163	2.45 N= 179	2.36 N= 160	2.83 N= 174	2.32 N= 164	1.48 N= 181	2.32 N= 163	1.47 N= 183
	MS 4	2.57 N= 222	2.62 N= 521	2.79 N= 220	3.15 N= 520	2.29 N= 219	1.48 N= 523	2.16 N= 218	1.87 N= 525
SEX	SX 1	2.12 N= 680	1.80 N=1291	2.43 N= 660	2.51 N=1279	2.04 N= 677	1.30 N=1304	2.71 N= 681	2.04 N=1297
	SX 2	2.21 N= 823	1.81 N=1622	2.26 N= 812	2.37 N=1572	2.21 N= 821	1.32 N=1630	2.26 N= 823	1.69 N=1625
TOTAL N		2.17 N=1503	1.81 N=2913	2.34 N=1472	2.43 N=2851	2.13 N=1498	1.31 N=2934	2.53 N=1505	1.85 N=2922